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Rommel, Carl Anders Truls

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Men in time

On masculine productivity, corruption and youth football in the aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

Carl Rommel, University of Helsinki

Abstract

This article explores men at a state-owned youth center in Cairo, struggling to cope with uncertainties and change in the aftermath of Egypt's January 2011 Revolution. Conceptually, the article critically engages anthropologist Laura Bear's suggestion that an ethics of productivity saturate neoliberal masculinity. As my ethnographic stories about football coaches and state bureaucrats illustrate, being a good man recurrently surfaced as a problem of how to work productively *in* and *on* time: as ambiguities between discordant futures that left material needs, familiar care, and development of football talents difficult to reconcile. Often, my interlocutors linked this conundrum to a wide-ranging opacity, conjured as "corruption" (*fisad*). My analysis of this male predicament allows me to spotlight one of the Egyptian revolution's most luring promises: a transparent and meritocratic system, where a

man's work would finally be allowed to work on all futures deemed morally and materially significant.

Keywords

Ethnography, Egypt, temporality, youth, revolution, corruption, value

Introduction

How does masculinity in contemporary Egypt articulate with ethical norms of productivity, the generation of public and private value, and work intended to shape desired futures? How are notions of productive manhood enacted among men in Cairo who work with young boys? How are opportunities and impediments for productivity and manliness talked about and understood? And how did all of this transform during the tumultuous years that followed Egypt's 2011 Revolution?

In this article, I set out to interrogate questions such as these within the context of Egyptian youth football. Presenting ethnographic depictions of men who worked at or around a government-run youth center in central Cairo in late 2012 and early 2013, the research traces a variety of male projects, actions and reactions in a post-revolutionary era replete with change and uncertainty. Egypt's youth centers (*marakiz al-shabab*; sing. *markiz al-shabab*) are a network of state-owned sports and culture clubs managed by government employees. First established during the Gamal Abdel Nasser presidency (1956-1970), the aim of the centers is to provide less wealthy Egyptian children with an affordable substitute to Egypt's

private sports clubs: a chance to play sports and music, surf the internet cheaply, or just a semi-public space to hang out in their free time. Every *markiz* invariably has a space for playing football. At some centers, we find expensive artificial grass pitches that many times are a result of local businessmen's donations and investments. However, at many other places, football is still played on torn and infamously slippery stone tiles (*balat*). The local centers are the location where a majority of Egypt's best football players first kicked a ball. Traditionally, it was also the place where talents were spotted by talent scouts (*kashifin*) and channelled upwards in the Egyptian football pyramid.

The article is part of an ethnographic research project about the emotional politics of Egyptian football, conducted in Cairo between August 2011 and March 2013 (Rommel 2014, 2015, 2016). In the last five months of this field research period, I came to spend an increasing part of my time at Cairo's youth centers, where I learned to know young players, parents, coaches and the responsible state employees. In parallel, I also conducted interviews with local businessmen, who invested in facilities at the centers, as well as with bureaucrats at the Directorate for Youth and Sports at Cairo Governorate, the authority in charge of all youth centers in Cairo. As often happens during fieldwork, my research took me to places well beyond the confines of the sites I had intended to explore. The people I met at the *marakiz* would introduce me to a range of other spaces and institutions where young boys play football in the Egyptian capital. In the ethnography that follows, we will come to know three of the people I met: the state employees, Mahmoud and Hossam, and Omar, a devoted youth coach.¹

The focus on men working with young football players opens up an analysis of masculine productive action on two distinct levels. As I will suggest below, the youth centers are, on the one hand, spaces where men work to make money so to reproduce themselves as well as social relations and kin. On the other hand, this is an institution explicitly designed to mold young boys into able and responsible men: a space for sport and recreation, surely, but

also for the making of new generations of Egyptians, set to become the nation's future. In this sense, my research on youth football highlights a construction of masculinity that in part deviates from previous anthropological and sociological studies of men who play football (Archetti 1993; Worby 2009) or follow the game as fans (Hughson 1997; King 1997; Marsh 1978). Instead of approaching football masculinities in terms of performativity, symbolism, violence or embodiment, my analysis is oriented towards men in Egypt who attempt to be productive and generate private and public value (Bear 2015). This, as we will see, allows me to pinpoint a particular ethnographic notion of "corruption" as well as different ways in which Egyptian men envisage solutions to this problem. In my conclusion, I will argue that these foci make it possible to rethink what the Egyptian revolution really comprised and promised for men in Cairo who struggled to make their work really work.

Productivity

In her recent book, *Navigating Austerity* (2015), an ethnographic study of bureaucrats, entrepreneurs and day laborers along the Hooghly River, India, anthropologist Laura Bear spotlights an intriguing notion of masculinity. Throughout her monograph, Bear identifies links between "popular ethics of productivity" and what it means to be a proper hard-working man. In an era marked by governmental defunding, privatization and failing infrastructures, writes Bear, men on all levels of the social hierarchy have come to consider the ability to (re-) produce material and social value as an essential male virtue. In order to be a good man – or, perhaps more accurately, good *at being* a man – Bear's interlocutors need to master specific "conducts of productivity" and classed ideals of "workmanship" (2015, 18). Often, such productive conduct manifests in practices of "speculation", i.e. "forms of social action that seek to anticipate the future and creatively bring it into being" (2015, 19). To be flexible

enough to seize fluid opportunities and shape desirable futures is imperative in the social setting that Bear considers. In 21st-century India, a man has to be highly adaptable and always ready to act and react. Only then can he “regenerate” public or private goods from the “ruins of austerity capitalism” (2015, 53).

Bear’s linking of masculinity with productivity does not emerge in a vacuum. For a few decades now, anthropologists have analyzed entanglements between ethics, productivity and labor in various sociocultural settings. United by a concern for how what counts as “value” is generated, this literature has expanded the notion of production so to also encompass the fashioning of persons, kin, social relations and private and public institutional arrangements (e.g. Graeber 2001, 2005, 2013; Guyer 1993; Yanagisako 2002; Bear et al. 2015). Notions of manhood are inexorably linked to such productive activities. As students of masculinities around the world tell us, an ability to produce and reproduce (for) one’s family is typically at the core of what it takes to be a proper man (e.g. Cornwall, Kariotis and Lindisfarne 2016; Gaibazzi 2013; Inhorn 2012; Osella and Osella 2006).

The added value of Bear’s work, then, lies not primarily in her theorization and conceptualization of masculinity, but in minute ethnographic illustrations of how ethical codes of productivity and value translate into lived experience: how her male interlocutors attempt to combine, but end up compromising, personal rewards and public goods; how men struggle to make their work and efforts really work under uncertain, often unfavorable and constantly shifting material and institutional conditions; and how *futures* recurrently emerge as a key variable to account for, as something men desire, envision and actively work on. To put it briefly, Bear’s depictions of laboring men and masculinity are dynamic yet constrained, forward-looking yet historically contextual. As such, she provides an optic that avoids stereotyping men, either as trapped in static patriarchal structures, or as living through seemingly perpetual “crisis,” two problematic tendencies in previous studies on men and

masculinities in the Middle East (e.g. De Soudy 2014; Horrocks 1994; see also Amar 2011a). What is more, Bear's stressing of speculative "future making" resonates particularly well with the experiences of men in Cairo in the tumultuous years that followed January 2011. After all, this was not only a period when well-entrenched masculine ideals of productivity, nurturing care and acting for the public good were intensified and accentuated (Ghannam 2013; Naguib 2015). It was also a moment in time when the Egyptians, more than ever before, found themselves negotiating multiple, sometimes conflicting, "grand schemes" and living "in the future tense" (Schielke 2015).

As a place where state bureaucrats, sports coaches, young players and local entrepreneurs converge, Cairo's *marakiz al-shabab* are full of men striving to productively generate futures and values. Here, professionals work to support their families, investors intervene with the aim to combine monetary rewards with social status, and boys work out to shape skills and bodies, so as to possibly fulfill lofty dreams in the glitzy football industry. Most importantly, though, the *marakiz* are literally dedicated to mold *al-shabab* (the youth). As I came to realize during my fieldwork, this mission gives the centers a political weight by default. The country's young population constitutes a never-ceasing well of inspiration for debate, debates that recurrently spill over into discussions about the national future. Especially the male subsection of *al-shabab*² – a social category that in contemporary Egypt comprises unmarried boys and men from their late teens well into their thirties – has in recent decades emerged as a contested discursive-political battleground: from the Mubarak era, when the youth generally were portrayed as troublesome thugs or lazy good-for-nothings, over the revolutionary years, when young revolutionaries suddenly became widely valorized, into the post-coup period, when male and youthful energies ambivalently have been framed as both a promise and a problem (cf. Amar 2011b; Armbrust 2005; Sika 2012; Swedenburg 2007). This sense of urgency was clearly discernible among state employees and coaches

working on fostering young boys, as football players, men and national subjects. All men I met considered sports an unmatched avenue for steering the youth away from all sorts of troubles, be it violence, drugs, obesity, and the nebulous realm called “politics” (cf. Swedenburg 2007; Menoret 2014, 182-185). In their daily work, therefore, my interlocutors did not only generate material, social and interpersonal value for themselves and for their families. They also saw themselves act, more or less productively, on what by definition constituted the nation’s future. This mission was at the core of their profession, and, if we follow Laura Bear, of their constituting themselves as proper men.

Let us take a closer look at what such a conduct of productivity could look like. In fall 2012 and winter 2013, I spent several evenings each week at the youth center in the working-class neighborhood of Bab el-Hut³ in central Cairo, watching young boys playing football and talking to employees, coaches, players and parents. Two men that I learned to know well were the center’s manager, Mahmoud, and his deputy, Hossam. Mahmoud and Hossam were state employees (*muwazzafin*), employed by the Ministry of Youth.⁴ Now in their late forties, they had both worked in Bab el-Hut for more than a decade. Although none of them lived in the area – well-educated men like them rarely do – they had acquired a certain social position and reputation in the neighborhood. Like many Egyptian bureaucrats, however, their relatively meager governmental salaries did not suffice to sustain the middle-class life style that their social capital reflected, and which their families aspired to. In order to balance their budgets, both Hossam and Mahmoud thus had second part-time jobs in the more lucrative private sector.

In informal chats and more formal interviews, Mahmoud and Hossam told me about the aims and ambitions of the center in Bab el-Hut. Frequently, they talked about the center’s dual mission: to provide a space for Egyptian kids to play sport, *and* to foster them as moral

and responsible citizens. To achieve this, the center did not only organize courses in a variety of sports (football, weight lifting, table tennis, karate, pool), but also music classes (violin, song), cultural activities, religious education and “citizenship courses” (*durus muwatna*). This multifaceted repertoire of activities constituted a sense of pride. As Mahmoud liked to remind me, no other *markiz* of comparable size in central Cairo ran a greater variety of courses. “It is important to have many different things, for different children,” he told me once.

Not all children like football. How can we reach out to them if everything happens at the football pitch? And by the way, sports alone aren’t enough to shape a complete human being (*insan kamil*). You need culture (*thaqafa*) as well. And religion (*din*), and morals (*akhla’*).

One important aspect of Egypt’s youth centers, Hossam and Mahmoud liked to reiterate, was that they were open and accessible to anyone, regardless of social class. In contrast to Cairo’s expensive private clubs, these were spaces for everyone: how could they otherwise be a positive force for all Egyptian *shabab*? In Bab el-Hut, this was very much the case; even children from the neighborhood’s many impoverished families could afford the very modest annual membership fee of ten Egyptian pounds (EGP, approx. \$1.5).⁵ Every night of the week, the concrete courtyard, the small internet café, and the artificial grass football pitch were full of young school children and teenagers. However, most of the kids did not come to participate in any of the center’s organized activities. Rather, they visited the center since it was one of very few spaces in Bab el-Hut to fool around, buy a cheap Pepsi, or just hang out. In fact, many of the courses, like music classes, required costly instruments, and the popular football academy was only available for those paying an additional fee. “It is not optimal; the courses are important for what we are trying to do,” Hossam once admitted.

But we cannot do anything about that. We hire professional instructors, so someone has to pay. In the end of the day, there are too many kids and too little space. I think it's good for the kids that they can come here, regardless of what they do. And our budget has to even up. We do what we can. We cannot do more than this.

One of the coaches that Hossam had previously paid to run the football academy at his center was Omar, a man in his early thirties who I learned to know through a common friend in the area. Omar was born in Bab el-Hut in the mid-70's as the youngest of four siblings. His now deceased father had been a state employee at the Ministry of Supplies; his mother was a housewife. From early on, Omar's life had orbited around football. As often as he could, he played with friends in the streets or at the youth center, and when his talent was spotted by a talent scout at a school tournament, he ended up in the youth team of the small Cairo club, Nadi el-Nil. As one of the very best in his cohort, Omar was immediately included in a team of one-year older boys; before long he was attracting attention from Cairo's most famous club, al-Ahly.

Between the age of ten and eighteen, Omar played regularly for al-Ahly's academy teams. He was considered a promising talent, at least as good as his teammate, the future national team midfielder, Muhammad Barakat. However, due to a combination of untimely injuries and military service, Omar's career had stalled in his late teens. Instead, he went on to study commerce at Cairo University, before spending ten years working in Egypt's booming tourism industry. Just after turning thirty, though, he received a phone call from an old friend from al-Ahly asking him if he wanted to coach one of the club's youth teams. Although this meant a significantly lowered salary, Omar accepted the offer right away. As he told me, justifying his choice: "Football is the passion of my life", "I have always loved children", and

“This was a chance to make a difference, to pay back and teach kids; football is something I really know”. After three years as a youth coach in al-Ahly’s academy, he signed a deal with Mahmoud to run the academy at the youth center in Bab el-Hut. For reasons that I will return to below, his spell at the *markiz* ended in disappointment. He left bitterly in early 2009, and he has not entered the compound ever since. At the time I came to know him, in late 2012, Omar was finishing his third year as a full-time coach at the private club Wadi Degla’s “Arsenal Academy” in the posh 6th of October suburb.⁶ Since getting married and having children a few years ago, he was living in the informal suburb Bulaq al-Dakrur in Giza. Yet, he still spent most of his spare time in Bab el-Hut, the neighborhood where he had grown up, where he had all of his friends, and which he still called home.

Like Mahmoud and Hossam, Omar had noted that his occupation had become more appreciated in recent years. “Finally,” he told me, people in Egypt had begun to understand the value of the work that he and his colleagues were carrying out day in and day out. As he once expressed it: “It’s not just about sports. We’re working with the future every day. What could be more important? It’s a big responsibility.” Another time, immediately after a session with the kids he trained at the Wadi Degla compound, his enthusiasm was tangible: “This is a great job: playing football with young boys and seeing how they get better. Sure it is hard work, but I really enjoy it. After so many years, it still makes me happy (*yifarraḥni*).”

But the happiness he felt there and then, with the children at the training pitch, would only last so long. As anthropologist Samuli Schielke has noted, also in reference to contemporary Egypt, “capitalism offers perhaps the most powerful social utopia of our time” (2015, 124). As far as Omar’s dreams and aspirations were concerned, this was no doubt the case. Having spent the last three years working among the posh villas and – by Cairo standards – clean air in the 6th of October suburb, he nurtured a dream to take his own children out of the congested city center, into the middle-class life that the desert

developments afforded. At the time I came to know him, however, this dream looked more than distant. Despite working full time with boys from the moneyed upper-middle classes six days a week, Omar's salary did not exceed 1500 EGP (\$231) per month. Given that he paid more than 300 EGP (\$46) in monthly rent, 150 EGP (\$23) for transportation, and several hundred pounds in school fees for his two sons, the space for savings was minimal. Instead, like so many other Egyptian men, Omar had to rely on small additional sources of income to make ends meet. In the last five years, he had sometimes driven a friend's taxi on weekends. Recently, he had begun selling pirate copies of al-Ahly track suits that another friend was producing in a small workshop in Cairo's outskirts. Regardless of when and where I saw him, he always carried around a large bag with pants and jackets, constantly ready to do business. "It is tough," he explained.

Everything has become more expensive after the revolution, but salaries are still the same. No one has money. Of course, buying new sports gear is nobody's priority now. But it's the same for everyone. One has to try to get some extra [money] wherever one can, but it's never really enough.

To combine being a productive, ethical, and caring man, in other words, was not an easy task in Bab el-Hut. The hurdles were many; the opportunities and openings scarce. Very often, people understood the predicament that they were facing under the overarching rubric of "corruption." This is an issue to which we now turn.

Corruption

When Egyptians talk about the many problems that mark the current era – within Egyptian football, in their personal lives, or in society in general – the topic of "corruption" (*fisad*) almost always comes up. While nobody considers himself part of the problem, people

will readily label institutions, authorities, people in power, or professional and social competitors as “corrupt” (*fasid*). Depending on one’s politics, profession, and social position, the Others accused of corruption vary. Yet, almost everyone agrees that corruption comprises a deep and extremely serious problem in Egypt, which somehow needs to be tackled.

At the *markiz* in Bab el-Hut, these discussions were commonplace. In 2012 and 2013, Egypt’s youth centers experienced a period of uncertainty and multiple attacks from all sorts of directions. With the national government facing an acute financial crisis, funding to non-prioritized activities within the Ministry of Youth were cut. As a result, Mahmoud and Hossam found it increasingly difficult to keep the activities at the center running. However, as they often complained, residents in the neighborhood did not properly grasp the real reasons behind the crisis. Instead of holding the “corrupt” (*fasda*) and “failing” (*fashla*) Mursi government responsible, people put the blame on bureaucrats, such as them, who did their best to keep the place afloat. It is here important to bear in mind that the Egyptian Revolution to a great extent was a revolution against the perceived ills of the state. For many Egyptians, low-level governmental institutions, like *marakiz al-shabab*, epitomized the corruption, nepotism, and inefficiency that the people had rose up to reform. Consequently, Mahmoud and Hossam’s problem was not only that they lacked funding, that parents told their children to stay home at night when clashes raged on nearby Tahrir Square, or that the unrest made it difficult for employees to get to work. Many residents in Bab el-Hut turned against the state employees, accusing them of being *filul* (remnants of the old regime) or, more commonly, *fasidin* (corrupt). For Mahmoud, this was deeply unfair. Once he told me:

I suppose they think we take money and put it into our own pockets: that we use our positions to enrich ourselves. But look at my salary; I have to work extra to support my family. I’m sure we can do things better and more efficiently; everyone

can; of course there is corruption in Egypt. But the corruption exists up there (*al-fisad huwa mawgud fu'*), among politicians, people with real power. No one can say I'm doing this for money. I tell you what: people don't really know what they mean when they speak about corruption (*al-sha 'b mish 'arif al-fisad da eih bezzabt*).

This final remark of Mahmoud's gave me pause. What *do* people in Egypt really mean when they speak about "corruption"? The Arabic word *fisad*, it should be noted, stems from the verbal root *fa-sin-dal*, a verb that in its transitive form (*fassada*) means to "spoil," "deprave," "ruin," "demoralize," "abase," "sully," "tarnish," "defile," as well as to "corrupt." something.⁷ In everyday usage, moreover, the concepts *fisad* (corruption) and *fasid* (corrupt) come with an even wider range of overlapping connotations: moral, organizational, hygienic and, of course, economic corruption. This inclusiveness vis-à-vis meanings and practices is well in line with classical ethnographic accounts of corruption from various parts of the world (e.g. Gupta 1995, 2012; Haller and Shore 2005; Hasty 2005; Smith 2008; see also Torsello and Venard 2016). Indeed, as anthropologists have argued convincingly, the distinction between practices considered as "corruption," which are consequently morally suspect, and morally acceptable actions that mobilize friendships, opaque business networks, and personal connections to generate value and gain power, is often a murky one (Bear 2015, 101-122; Schielke 2015, 116-123; see also Accad 1992). It is all a grey zone, typically in the eye of the beholder. Conceptually, corruption is elastic enough to incorporate everyone and no one, a property which, arguably, makes it so very potent in political debates.

And yet, regardless of the concept's catch-all properties, within the context of Egyptian youth football, discussions about *fisad* habitually harkened back on a more limited set of tropes. To pinpoint this articulation, it is useful to consider in some detail how Omar, the youth coach, spoke about development and scouting of Egyptian football talents, in the

past as well as in the present. Whenever I met Omar, our discussions tended to gravitate toward how “corruption” hindered the country’s best talents from “making it.” One cold Tuesday evening, as we drank a cup of sweet tea in the empty Wadi Degla coffee shop after one of Omar’s training session, he told me:

Remember I told you about how different everything was in Bab el-Hut in my childhood in the 1980s? We were all poor, but still there was a real chance for everyone, just look at me. There were spaces to play football everywhere: in the streets, on parking lots and at *al-markiz*. Sure, the pitches were all *balat* (stone tiles) and the balls were bad, but there were *kashifin* (talent scouts) in every neighborhood, so if someone was really good, a club would pick him up. That’s what happened to me, remember? In the end, the boys who had talents and passion to train made it. Everyone had a chance.

Since the days of Omar’s childhood in Bab el-Hut, however, the game’s capability to channel boys with talent towards richness and glory had gradually been diluted. Life might well have been hugely unfair also in the 1970s and 1980s, but football had constituted a unique sphere of meritocracy and chances for everyone. In the time I learned to know Omar, these days were long gone. For, as he continued, not without a stint of bitterness:

Everything has changed. First there is no space to play [...] due to all congestion you know (‘*ashan kul al-zahma ya ‘ni*). All empty spaces in Bab el-Hut have been occupied, by new buildings or parked cars. But the biggest problem is the corruption at the youth center (*al-fisad fil-markiz*). I worked there for a year; I know how it works. They [the state employees] work for themselves, not for the people. There is no hope. We have seen it for too long: state institutions just take our money. The corruption is everywhere. Everyone knows this. That is why most

normal people without contacts rather pay 100 EGP per hour to play football at a privately owned pitch than trying to book a slot at the *markiz* for 50 EGP. Because, they never know; they might not get the cheap slot they are promised anyway. It's all about contacts (*wasta*), too much hassle.

But the corruption did not only hinder Egypt's youth from developing and flourishing. It had also affected Omar personally.

I tell you something: the job I had at the *marakiz* was my dream job. Bab el-Hut is my home. But I had to quit because they did not let me do anything good. I started a new football school with proper match shirts and regular matches against teams coached by my friends at al-Ahly and al-Tersana [another famous Cairo club]. It became hugely popular and brought in much more money than those lazy ones had ever expected. I offered them a deal: I take half of the profit and the center gets half. It was my ideas and my contacts! But they refused. I told you, they're corrupt. They promised me a lot, but in the end, they took everything. So I had to quit, even though I loved the kids and they loved me. [...] The football school they run now is useless compared to mine. You've seen it, right? Sixty children on a small pitch with one non-professional coach who is just shouting! How can anyone improve under such conditions?

Omar's complaints about failed talent development, missed opportunities, and a dream job that were not meant to be articulate an ethnographic notion of corruption with a specific form and character. For him, like for many other men I met, the *fisad* that plagued Egyptian society went beyond individuals taking bribes and distributing privileges (although that was certainly part of the problem). Rather, corruption was an all-encompassing predicament of the era, comprising strained spatiality, a mentality of neglect, widespread laziness, defunct

institutions, chronic unemployment, and urban overcrowding. What Omar alluded to, in other words, was a complex of relations, materiality, money and discourse that “clogged up” channels for social mobility (Green 2008), which substituted vulgar aesthetics and brute force for meritocratic structures (Armbrust 1996), which rendered the future opaque and difficult to predict and actualize (Bear 2015), and which wore down subjects physically and mentally (Povinelli 2011). In short, corruption indexed all those obstacles that impeded men’s efforts to produce and reproduce private and public values and futures. It was systematic, and it was unavoidable. And it made it enormously difficult for men in Egypt to enact masculine conducts of productivity.

Cleanliness

It is important to stress that Egypt’s revolutionary period was not merely an historical juncture when the country’s endemic corruption was endlessly discussed and problematized. The years that followed the uprisings were likewise a point in time when institutions, activists, politicians, and individuals articulated initiatives for how to tackle the problem. To cleanse the clogged system, reintroduce a lost meritocracy, and somehow allow men to be productive, develop, and flourish were at the heart of the revolutionary project. This tendency was also very much visible at the *markiz* in Bab el-Hut. Mahmoud and Hossam might not have admitted that their institution had had a problem with corruption, but they were acknowledging that the center had to adapt to a new reality in the post-2011 nation. At the very least, the pressured state employees realized that they needed to revamp their image so to somewhat preempt the accusations that the general public directed at them.

As part of this rethinking, the *markiz* saw a couple of novelties being introduced in late 2012 and early 2013. As state funding was drying up, the center came to host two

externally funded football tournaments. The first of these, Copa Coca-Cola, was a nationwide five-a-side tournament for 15-year old boys, played for the first time at Egypt's *marakiz al-shabab* between December 2012 and March 2013.⁸ The competition in Cairo began with qualification matches at each *markiz*, where the winning team qualified to the city final. After subsequent regional and national finals, the winner would represent Egypt in a global tournament in London the following summer. The cup was organized in cooperation between Coca-Cola and the Ministry of Youth. Whereas the ministry provided spaces to play – the pitches at the country's *marakiz al-shabab* – Coca-Cola covered all other organizational costs: referees, balls, match shirts and, most spectacularly, an enormous advertisement campaign.

For anyone following Egyptian sports media or just moving around Cairo in October and November 2012, Copa Coca-Cola must have come across as a very prominent football tournament. Commercials for the tournament, promising to “take the Egyptian youth all the way to London,” were run daily on television, and huge billboards were placed along motorways all over the capital. On the morning of the qualifications in Bab el-Hut, the promotion company Field Action – contracted by Coca-Cola to organize and run the event – spent hours dressing the youth center in Coca-Cola's red and white colors, and the soft drink company's FIFA World Cup 2010 hymn, “Wavin' Flag,” was playing on repeat from oversized loudspeakers. For me, it all seemed like a giant marketing campaign for Coca-Cola, parachuted onto the governmental infrastructure that the *marakiz* provided. At the same time, the tournament was run faultlessly. The kids I spoke to seemed delighted that something out of the ordinary was happening, and they ensured me that they were having a great time.

A good month later, in February 2013, I visited the tournament's Cairo finals at another youth center in Nasser City, Eastern Cairo. At this later stage of the cup, the saturation of brands and commercials had been intensified yet another notch. In addition to the already extensive set-up that I had witnessed in Bab el-Hut, the kids playing were now

dressed up in brand new match shirts, shorts, and socks with Coca-Cola's logotypes, and every player was given a can of Coke after each match. Furthermore, the entire event was recorded by a professional film team that did not hesitate to stop the matches at any time, so that they could enter the pitch and get the best close-ups or angles of the action. Frequently, the crew also instructed groups of youth who had gathered to watch the matches, either to cheer loudly or to behave more properly, all to make the event look suitable in what was to become a promotion video.

When the day's activities were over, I got the chance to talk to the representative for Coca-Cola in Egypt, who was sent out to supervise the event. Clearly, the company's envoy was satisfied with how it had all developed:

I think we're doing a great job. Everything is really clean and professional. It's a nice project for everyone. For us [at Coca-Cola], it's great promotion, but it's especially nice for the kids. You have to remember that most of them come from very poor areas. They've only played football in the streets and on *marakiz al-shabab* before. To play in real shirts with brand names and to be filmed by a professional team is a great chance. You can see that they love it. It's premium.

The next day, I went to see Mahmoud in Bab el-Hut. I said that I visited yesterday's cup in Nasser City, and I indicated that perhaps it was all a bit too commercialized. Did he also believe that the marketing campaign had been prioritized over the young boys' football tournament, the presumed core activity? Mahmoud partly agreed:

I know that you would say that, Carl. I could see that you didn't like it when they were here in Bab el-Hut either; you're such a socialist! Of course, all that marketing is nothing we asked for. But you have to understand that what they do is very professional. They've money; the organization is smooth; everything works.

We've not had a tournament like this, on all *markiz* across Egypt, for decades.

These guys know business (*bizniz*). It's clean (*nadif*). It improves the image of what we're doing. We need more of this, I think: to continue what we're doing in this difficult time. But in a new way.

If Mahmoud was mildly hesitant to the intentions behind Copa Coca-Cola, this was nothing in comparison with his colleague Hossam's opinion of the second new tournament hosted at the center that winter. One day in January 2013, I noted a small sign on the wall outside the *markiz*, announcing that the Muslim Brotherhood's political branch, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), would organize a Festival of Youth and Sports (*mahragan shabab wi riyada*) there the following week. As I read on the sign, the festival was a Cairo-wide football tournament for adult male teams, comprising qualification rounds on each *markiz*, followed by a district final and, eventually, a big all-Cairo final.

At this point in time, the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated President Muhammad Mursi's government was in rapid decline. After a brief period of calm following the presidential elections in Summer 2012, a bitter and in part violent rift had opened up between secularists and Islamists; less than six months later, in summer 2013, these tensions would escalate in massive anti-Mursi demonstrations, a military coup led by Field Marshal Abdel Fatah el-Sisi and a bloody clampdown against the Brotherhood. In the current climate, Hossam and Mahmoud – both stern secularists – were unwilling to even speak about the upcoming event. “We do not know much about that thing,” Hossam told me.

Some *ikhwani* [Muslim Brotherhood member] came by one day and booked the football pitch for five consecutive nights. You cannot be sure what they really want. Why would they pay for such a thing? But in the end of the day, they rule the

country now. If they want to do something here and pay for it, fine for us. It is good that things are happening and that they try. But I'm not sure how many people will show up. It's difficult to know. In any case, I don't care what they do.

I missed the first day of the Festival of Youth and Sports, but as I arrived to the youth center on day two, I could tell that Hossam's reluctance toward the organizers constituted a minority position in Bab el-Hut. As a matter of fact, I had never seen the place as crowded. The whole neighborhood seemed to be there, either to play themselves or to watch their brothers, sons, or friends playing. The level of many of the matches was surprisingly high; clearly many of Bab el-Hut's very best adult players participated. The organization was likewise impressive: the organizers had hired proper referees, a witty man was commentating on the matches through loudspeakers, and match results and goal scorers were listed on board next to the pitch. Except for Hossam and Mahmoud, who stubbornly spent the night drinking tea alone in their office, all of the coaches and many of the young boys who regularly played at the center were present. To my slight surprise, the FJP party functionaries, whom I had never seen before, seemed well-known to the neighborhood's residents. At a break between two matches, one of them – a short man in his thirties in a brown suit and a Brotherhood-typical, well-groomed beard – approached me. He introduced himself as Ahmed, the leader for the local FJP-branch. When I told him who I was, he enthusiastically started to tell me about his party, the cup, and his ambitions for Egypt and Bab el-Hut in the future.

The reason why we organize this tournament is simple. It makes us visible and it gives something to the people that the *markiz* has never delivered. You know the people who work here, don't you? You know how they are. Corrupt. Sitting in their office, drinking tea and doing nothing; putting money in their own pockets. We in FJP want this to change, step by step. Of course, they don't want us here, but what

can they do? We pay the rent, and the people like us. Over time, though, we will change things more profoundly through politics: replace employees, new laws and regulation. Everyone will benefit, especially the youth who play football. Finally, they will get a real chance to do something. Most of us are from the business sector, the real world. We know how to get things done. *Insha'Allah*, it will be more professional here as well. Respectable (*muhtaram*). Cleaner (*andaf*).

Mismatch

These vignettes from two externally organized football tournaments at a youth center in Cairo suggest that the Egyptian revolution was not merely manifest in demonstrations or at the ballot box. While both cups are possibly best understood as elaborate marketing events, it is also unquestionable that they stepped in to fill a function that employees at the *markiz* could not any longer carry out, due to lack of money, personnel, will or energy. The tournaments gave the center the opportunity to draw on financial and cultural capital of the powers that be in Egypt at the time. Reaching out to external actors within the private sector and country's ruling political party, it allowed Mahmoud and Hossam, however reluctantly, to continue fulfilling their zeal and mission among Bab el-Hut's youth. Moreover, while it is clear that men from Coca-Cola, FJP and the youth center itself sought to extract different types of value from the tournaments, my material also points to a shared ethics of masculine productivity tied to an idealization of transparency and cleanliness. No matter whom I talked to, the future envisioned and desired was one where the endemic troubles of corruption would be overcome. The tournaments promised to cleanse the clogged system that the youth centers embodied, a system which for too long had impeded men's and boy's efforts to be productive, work out, and flourish.

Omar, the youth coach, was well aware of these post-revolutionary developments at the youth center in the neighborhood he still called home. One day in February 2013, we met in a coffee shop just outside the *markiz's* walls. When I asked him what he thought of the initiatives that were underway, he depicted them as a promising first step:

These are the type of things the revolution should change. The guys in there [pointing at the wall] have already lost a lot of power. They do not get much support from the government (*al-hukuma*) any longer. That's why they need to look for new money, from the private sector (*al-qata' al-khas*) and even from *al-ikhwan* (The Muslim Brotherhood). This is a normal development and it is good. It will make it all cleaner, more professional. Hopefully, it'll benefit the boys in Bab el-Hut. They need it.

At the same time, Omar was well aware that the cleanliness that the revolution promised was unlikely to reach everyone. As anthropologist Samuli Schielke (2015, 181-182) and Jessica Winegar (2016) have both argued, aspirations to revolutionary cleansing and starting anew have in Egypt often been problematically classed projects, which risk disguising more systematic problems requiring thorough structural reforms. Omar had his very own experience of what a cleanliness that was not for everybody could look like. Three years as a youth coach at Wadi Degla club had granted him the opportunity to work on some of the best and cleanest facilities that Cairo could offer. Reflecting the Egyptian capital's enormous class differences, Wadi Degla's palm trees, swimming pools, coffee shops, and franchise restaurants were a world apart from the youth center in Bab el-Hut. As Omar would often tell me – with poorly concealed disappointment and a hint to the world's injustices – the possibilities he had to teach the kids football skills were incredible. Whereas he had typically worked alone with 40 kids on the small five-a-side pitch in Bab el-Hut, the regulations of the

Arsenal Academy prescribed a maximum of 16 children for every two coaches and modern equipment suited for all kinds of exercises. Yet, as Omar explained, it was rare to find more than twelve players turning up at the training on any given day. “They have so many other things that they prioritize: school exams, vacations, music classes. The parents pay a lot for the academy, but it is not their first priority.”

Partly due to these priorities, working at Wadi Degla had never lived up to Omar’s expectations. Surely, the facilities were great, and he knew that he was privileged to work intensively with small groups of players. But something was lacking. Once I asked him if he believed that the huge discrepancy in facilities was likely to tilt the class composition of Egypt’s professional football players – who traditionally stem from poorer social strata – towards higher classes in years to come. Somewhat surprisingly, his reply was a vehement “No”. “It is never going to happen,” he explained,

It doesn’t matter how good pitches and well-educated coaches we have out here: these boys will never play for the national team. They’ll become engineers and doctors. The boys who really care about football, all the great talents, come from poor areas in Cairo or from the provinces. That’s where football is really important, where players take the time and have the passion to train hard, to do what’s necessary. Sometimes, that’s why I feel that what I’m doing here is useless. It’s all nice and shiny, but it’s not the real thing (*mish ha’i’i*). To be honest with you, this is child care, not talent development

The way Omar drew a distinction between “child care” – being useless – and “talent development” – the “real thing” – does not only highlight what types of (masculine) productivity he considered valuable and worthy to engage in. His complaints also spoke to a particular kind of class inequality that he found deeply troubling. Later that same evening, in

the microbus on our way home to the city, Omar elaborated further on the mismatch between talents and facilities. Addressing the compromise that working at the Arsenal Academy entailed, he touched on a privatized and geographically concentrated cleanliness that did not reach the areas where it would matter the most.

This is why I got so disappointed when I had to quit my job at the *markiz* [in Bab el-Hut]. I told you, that was my dream job. There were much more talent there than here in Degla. 100 times more! They would beat the rich kids I coach now easily, 8-0. You cannot compare. But it didn't work out because of the corruption. They laughed at me and they took all the money. It was not possible for me to make any money there where I really wanted to be, and where I could make a difference.

This is what makes me sad.

At the same time, Omar entertained the hope that perhaps, a new configuration of space, potentiality, and materiality was coming together. A new chance to return to Bab el-Hut in a role that allowed him to more efficiently work and extract value was possibly on the horizon:

There is this new Spanish NGO. They came after the revolution. They're investing in football pitches in poor neighborhoods; they try to set up professional but affordable football academies. They've already built facilities in Matariyya and Bulaq al-Dakrur. One of my friends works for them. I visited last week. It was great, new and clean. Not the same level as Wadi Degla, but good. Much better than *marakiz al-shabab*. Much better! And without the state employees. Now, they want to build a center in Bab el-Hut. A guy called me yesterday. They're negotiating for a piece of land. If they get it, they want me to set up the academy there.

I asked him if he would leave the job at Wadi Degla if a chance to work for the Spanish NGO occurred. I could tell that this was no easy choice.

Obviously, there's a risk. I am making decent money at Degla and I might get promoted. But at the same time, this is a chance to do something that I really want to do. Finally, someone is starting something clean and professional also in my area. Without corruption. I think this can give the *shabab* who have the talent a real chance to improve. I can set up my own academy and hopefully form a competitive team. And you know what, their business model is that they develop talents and sell them to the big clubs. As a coach, you can even get part of the profit. So even if the salary isn't that great, I think it could be a chance for me as well. If we work hard, we will all profit: the youth, the Spanish guys, and I.

Conclusion – Revolutionary Promises

When I last visited Bab el-Hut in October 2016, the revolutionary years felt very distant, indeed. At the youth center, it was almost as if the turmoil in 2012 and 2013 had never happened. While critical of some of the President el-Sisi's latest statements, Mahmoud⁹ was overall content with the policies of the new government. He assured me that things were now getting "back to normal" at the center as well as in the country. Whereas Copa Coca-Cola was still an annual event, the Festival of Youth and Sports had been a one-off thing. The fact that that the center had co-organized a tournament with the now terror-labeled Muslim Brotherhood just a few years earlier was not an issue Mahmoud felt like talking about. Although the center was full of noisy kids, a new sense of calm was noticeable. The urge to restructure activities and bring in external money and actors seemingly belonged to the past.

During the same visit to Cairo, I also met Omar. For him, the last few years had been tough. The Spanish NGO's plans for a new type of football academy had not come through.

When I asked him about it, he first did not understand what I was talking about. When he finally did recall the project, he mumbled something about a person that had never called back. In fact, Omar had stopped coaching altogether over the past two years. Instead, he had invested some hard-earned savings in a small shop selling sports clothes in an alleyway in Bab el-Hut. As we met, his business was struggling badly, in particular as a result of the drastic devaluation of the Egyptian pound, which made imports very expensive. He had several plans for getting back into coaching. Yet, as he also acknowledged, he had opened the shop to get more stability needed to support his family. To once again rush into new and uncertain projects was not an option for the time being.

And yet, the fact that Mahmoud's youth center is "back to normal" and Omar's bold dreams from 2012 and 2013 are unlikely to materialize does not make their stories irrelevant to ponder. In contrast, I would say that this makes the ethnographic material contained in this article all the more revealing. For, what my material about youth football at and around the *markiz* in Bab el-Hut illustrates well is how the revolutionary years instigated and made visible a multiplicity of novel projects and ideals for how to be a productive, future-making Egyptian man. Whether in Hossam and Mahmoud's struggle to cast off criticism of corruption and keep the activities running in the tournaments organized by Coca Cola and the Freedom and Justice Party, or in Omar trying to create spaces to work and flourish, what we see are attempts to generate private and public value, regulated by overlapping (and sometimes contradictory) conducts of productivity. Very often, these projects were explicitly designed to anticipate, act on, and mold desirable futures. To work with and on Egypt's *shabab*, after all, is by definition a speculative enterprise aimed at "bringing futures in to being" (Bear, 2015: 19). At other times and in other contexts, though, the various initiatives that the men I met engaged in were more than anything a matter of survival. To creatively generate productivity

and value was here a requirement for merely staying afloat, in a world and in an era that were highly uncertain and constantly on the move.

Without a doubt, the time period between 2012 and 2013 that this article considers was an exceptionally ephemeral one for a great many Egyptian men. As scholars such as David Scott (2014) and Hannah Arendt (1963) have famously argued, revolutions are the epitome of contingency and dislocation, moments in time when possibilities seem endless and when bold human actors – most often male – can intervene in history and potentially change worlds.¹⁰ But it is never only a matter of grabbing power and doing politics. As the ethnography in this article has suggested, revolutions can also be historical junctures, at which more mundane possibilities for being an agile and productive man expand. To get a better sense of how such a proliferation of masculinized possibilities could be experienced, let us once again turn to Omar and his life and dreams in those heady years. As we have seen, Omar often mobilized youth football – the world he knew the best – as a *metonym*, both for the ills of the old regime *and* for revolution's promises: how a previously broadly meritocratic system in the last decades had been “corrupted” by greedy state-employees and strained urban space; how the private sector, with its unmatched yet unequally distributed resources, provided cleanliness and professionalism merely for a negligible and largely untalented elite; but also, how the last year of turmoil had come to break down the state's monopoly, as external financial resources and actors were knocking on the door.

Regardless of its many uncertainties, therefore, the revolution was for Omar largely a force for good. New private initiatives, such as the ones currently underway at Cairo's youth centers, promised more transparency, a more appropriate distribution of material facilities, and a plethora of cleaner pathways towards brighter and more promising futures. Even as late as the winter of 2013 – more than two years after the beginning of the uprisings on Tahrir Square – the political transformations lumped together as *al-thawra* (the revolution) looked

set to reinstate a long lost meritocracy, which the last decade of corruption efficiently had crushed: it would introduce a fairer playing field for all, on which Bab el-Hut's wealth of talent would be allowed to develop, grow and flourish.¹¹ What is more, on a more personal level, Omar also entertained an anticipation that the revolutionary process would allow him to *combine* productive generation of value in his own life – money to realize the dreams he had for his family – *with* the development of football talent that he felt so very passionately about. In contrast to in the corrupt past, when he had always found himself working on these futures somewhat out of sync – forced to choose between personal prosperity and professional zeal – revolutionary Egypt would be a place where his diverging ambitions and projects finally linked up in some sort of harmony.

Finally, then, what becomes legible from the theoretical ponderings and ethnographic vignettes presented in this paper is a notion of masculinity as a temporal enigma: as a set of ambiguities between discordant futures that leave material needs, familial care, and development of the neighborhood's talents difficult to reconcile. In addition, what we also see surfacing is a particular vision of the idealized object conjured up among my interlocutors as the "revolution." For, while it is certainly true that the experience of Egypt's revolutionary years was disorienting and fractured one – squeezed between political promises, personal anxieties, and numbing economic uncertainties (Schielke 2015; Ahlberg 2017) –ideals for what the revolution *ought to be* rather alluded to a re-captured synchronicity between social and individual futures. At the very least, this was at the core of what Omar envisioned regarding what the revolutionary transformation would grant him and the youth playing football in Bab el-Hut. In short, Omar hoped that he would become a truly productive man: a man whose work would finally be allowed to work on *all* those futures deemed morally and materially valuable.

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¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² The word *shabab* is plural of the masculine noun *shabb* (boy). While the word has predominantly masculine connotations, it can be used to reference young people of both genders. The feminized form *shabbat* (young girls or women; sing. *shabba*) is rarely used in everyday language.

³ To ensure anonymity of the people at the youth center, I have chosen to alter the name of the neighborhood that I was working in.

⁴ Since the time of my fieldwork, the Egyptian Cabinet has been reshuffled several times. At the time of writing, the youth centers are part of the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

⁵ At the time of my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, one US Dollar equaled approximately 6.5 EGP (Egyptian Pound). Since then, the Egyptian currency market rate has been drastically devalued. The exchange rate at the time of writing (October 2017) is 17.6 EGP per USD. The currency conversions found throughout this article reflect the exchange rate in early 2013.

⁶ Private football academies are a recent phenomenon in Cairo. They are relatively expensive football schools for children and teenagers. Like the one in Wadi Degla, academies in Egypt are often run in (very loose) cooperation with one or another famous European club.

⁷ *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, fourth edition.

⁸ The cup tournament has since then turned into an annual event.

⁹ Hossam had quit the job in Bab el-Hut and moved on to another center.

¹⁰ For a critical discussion of the way in which iconic revolutionaries and exceptional events tend to be gendered, see Winegar 2012.

¹¹ This understanding of the revolution as a way to (re-)create meritocracy strongly echoes promises articulated by the Nasserist "revolution" in the 1950s and 1960s (see e.g. Mossallam 2014).